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ABSTRACT

Presenting suggestions for conceptualizing Rural Development Act Title V program evaluations, this paper focuses upon a five-level program outcomes model which encompasses a causal sequence of anticipated shortrun, intermediate, and longrun outcomes. Examples of possible Title V measurement foci are presented for each of five outcome levels as follows: (1) development of the program plan (organization of responsibility within the land grant university; creation of an advisory group; and creation of a program design); (2) organization of the program delivery system (establishment of a formal organizational structure; involvement of extra-university institutions and agencies; involvement of a range of university departments; and creation of new research-extension relationships); (3) program operations (initiation of direct services to rural people; organization of citizens' groups; creation of specific plans or proposals for development of projects; preparation of publications and educational materials; development of training courses; and conduct of research studies); (4) establishment of new facilities, services, etc. (creation of new community delivery systems; improvement of rural housing, transportation, etc; establishment of new regulations; and development of new job and/or income producing opportunities); (5) improvement in the quality of rural living (personal well-being; satisfying employment and increased income; a more healthful and satisfying rural environment; and wider material and cultural opportunities). (JC)

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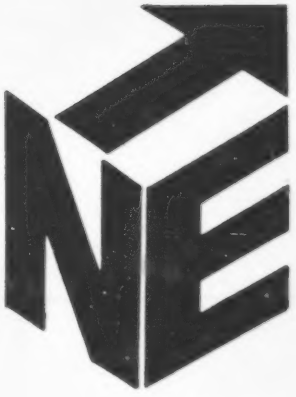

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An Approach to Evaluation of Rural Development Act Title V Programs

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AN APPROACH TO EVALUATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT ACT TITLE V PROGRAMS

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AN APPROACH TO EVALUATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT ACT TITLE V PROGRAMS

Pilot programs funded under Title V of the Rural Development Act of 1972 should be evaluated for several reasons, the most obvious of which is that evaluation is required under provisions of the Act. Another reason of perhaps even greater importance, however, is that evaluation of Title V programs can provide needed information about the ability of land-grant universities to organize and administer effective programs of rural development. In essence, Title V is a test of whether land-grant institutions can integrate more of their resources than have previously been engaged in development programs and apply them successfully to the initiation and support of efforts to increase the quality of diverse aspects of rural living. Recognition of the need for evaluation of this test program is reflected in the number of different audience groups that would apparently be interested in the evaluation findings. (Larson, 1975)

While there is need for evaluation of Title V programs, certain problems could hinder the conduct of useful evaluations. An important problem is that resources supporting the programs were both late in coming and limited in amount in some states. Thus the scale of some programs has been small and the time during which effects might occur has been considerably less than the three years originally planned. Furthermore, the aims of development projects tend to be broad and difficult to specify in precise, measurable terms. Under these circumstances, program effects may be minimal and difficult to detect or measure, although nonetheless they may be important.

In view of the potential problems, Title V evaluators will have to plan their studies carefully if the important needs for evaluative data are to be filled. The purpose of the present paper is to provide a perspective that may be of assistance to those responsible for conceptualizing and designing Title V evaluations.

A Basis For Evaluation Design

A widely accepted approach to evaluation is to compare the actual outcomes of a program to its stated goals or objectives. (Suchman, 1967; Weiss, 1972) It is also important in evaluation to study why a program may have succeeded or failed in reaching its goals. (Suchman, 1971) Since the emphasis in evaluation thus is on outcomes and their causes, it is important when designing either a development program or its evaluation to start with a model of the succession of outcomes that the program is expected to produce. Such a model specifies the shortrun, intermediate, and longrun, or ultimate outcomes of the program in the sequence in which they are expected to occur. In essence, an outcomes model is an anticipated causal chain of program effects; the shortrun effects are conceived to be preconditions for the occurrence of intermediate effects, which are in turn conceived to be preconditions for longrun effects. Each specific listed program effect is a step leading to a higher, or more final, effect. Such a causal model can be thought of as the theory of a program, a hypothesized hierarchical sequence of expected outcomes that are linked by logic and dependent upon the implementation of program operations.* Such a model helps to plan program operations, to

*Such a model may also be thought of as a representation of the impact that a program is expected to have over time on the conditions it is designed to treat. (Freeman and Sherwood, 1965, 1970)

guide approaches to the evaluation of program outcomes, and to identify the reasons for their occurrence or nonoccurrence.

An example from the community development program area will help to illustrate the application of a program outcomes model. Suppose a university is sponsoring a development program built around the process of linking the available technical and financial resources of public and private agencies to the efforts of citizens of a community who are working on various projects such as improvement of health and educational services, expansion of recreational opportunities, and attraction of new industry. An outcomes hierarchy model might consist of a causal sequence of anticipated shortrun, intermediate and longrun outcomes such as the following: (1) organization of a structure for citizens' participation in development; (2) definition of community problems: (3) assignment of priorities to problems and specification of project objectives; (4) development of action plans or proposals; (5) implementation of plans including the utilization of available resources; (6) establishment of specific new community facilities or programs such as health clinics, special educational programs, playgrounds, or job opportunity programs; (7) delivery to the citizens of new services and new economic opportunities; and (8) improved health, welfare, and economic well-being of the citizens. Such a model would be the conceptual framework that would guide the design and application of program operations.*

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*The use of a somewhat more basic and elaborate model for guidance in community development evaluation has been suggested by Bennett and Nelson (1975).

The model could also serve to direct evaluation efforts. Measurement of the outcomes of the program could be taken at any one or all of the eight outcome levels, depending upon the stage of program development that has been reached. In this type of program, it would obviously take a considerable amount of time to generate measurable longrun effects at Level 8. However, measuring such ultimate effects, assessing their benefits in comparison to program costs, and determining the relative advantages and disadvantages of using this type of program to produce such effects are the ultimate tests of program worth. Such tests of final effects are essential to evaluation that is complete and definitive. Nevertheless, evaluation can also focus usefully on the measurement of shortrun and intermediate outcomes that are lower in the outcomes hierarchy. In so doing, the emphasis of an evaluation shifts from assessing ultimate program outcomes toward determining whether the shortrun and intermediate outcomes that are necessary preconditions for final outcomes have been achieved. Depending upon the budget and time available for evaluation, the measurement of outcomes that are relatively close to the beginning of the anticipated chain of program effects may in fact be all that is feasible. However, if the logic of the outcomes model is correct, such evaluation of shortrun and intermediate outcomes can provide evidence from which to project the probability of more final program outcomes.

Although it is not the purpose of this paper to explore the relative merits of different types of evaluation designs or the practical issues associated with their application, it may be apparent that a program outcomes model can help in developing the specifics of

several different designs. Such a model can help to guide controlled experimental approaches to evaluation, quasi-experimental approaches, simple before and after designs, or after-only designs. Except for the latter type of design, the basic approach to evaluation is to establish a baseline of relevant measurements of outcome variables before the program begins and to compare these to measurements of the same variables taken as the program proceeds at each level of program outcome at which measurement is appropriate.

Title V Program Evaluation

The broad aim of the Rural Development Act of 1972 is to provide the financial and technical assistance necessary to make rural areas more desirable places to work and to live. The purpose of Title V is to test the techniques and organizational structures necessary to make the nation's land-grant institutions more meaningful contributors to the success of rural development programs. Title V has been interpreted as essentially an attempt to provide a research and extension backup for rural development. (Moe, 1975)

One of the most troublesome of the potential problems that confront the evaluation of Title V programs is the importance of generating useful evaluation findings before the three year program authorization period has run its course. The difficulty is that most long-run, ultimate program outcomes can be expected to occur only after a passage of a considerably longer period of time. In view of this circumstance it seems especially vital that the Title V program evaluations be guided by soundly conceived program outcomes models. As has been pointed out, the use of such models enables the

evaluator to specify measurable shortrun and intermediate program outcomes, the achievement of which can logically be expected to lead to more final outcomes. Determining whether Title V programs have been successful in reaching their intermediate goals would thus constitute a useful and feasible approach to Title V evaluation.

Even though the specifics of the various states' Title V program models can be expected to vary, the guidelines, expectations, and intents embodied in Title V will tend to create fundamental similarities among aspects of the models that are developed. The emphasis in Title V on pilot testing of organizational structures and techniques for support of rural development, for example, tends to insure that most program models will include as an intermediate outcome the establishment of a viable organizational system for the delivery of assistance from land-grant institutions. The intents of Title V that pertain to the organization of such systems provide guidance for identification of measurable variables that might be useful in determining whether an adequate program delivery system has been established. The intents pinpoint specific elements of the program delivery system that must be made operational as a precondition for the fulfillment of the longrun aims of Title V. If it can be shown that these system elements are functioning, then if the logic of the outcomes models is correct, there will be good reason to believe that when the models have had time to run their courses the longrun outcomes will also be borne out.

The intents of Title V that relate to the development of a delivery system for the support of rural development activity are as follows: (1) There should be a new relationship established between research

and university extension; (2) University resources to be committed to the support of rural development should no longer be drawn almost exclusively from colleges of agriculture, engineering and home economics; (3) New forms of sharing and collaboration in support of rural development should be established between land-grant institutions and other public and private institutions of higher education; (4) There should be effective citizen participation in the guidance of university efforts in rural development; (5) There should be coordination of university programs with the programs of federal, state, and local government.* Taken together, these intents define a rather complex operating system, out of which specific rural development goals and programs would be expected to emerge. Clearly, it is intended that elements of the system will include the land-grant university as a sponsoring institution with important roles for other interested institutions of higher education, for a diversity of units within the land-grant university, for various citizens and citizens' groups, and for state and local government. It is especially appropriate for an evaluation to focus on the workings of such a system in programs with broad aims such as Title V. (Alkin, 1969) Among the questions to be answered are whether the system was assembled as intended; whether it functioned smoothly; and if not, why not?

Measurement of more final Title V outcomes at steps that are higher up the outcomes hierarchy than the program delivery system is, of course, also extremely desirable. Although successful outcomes

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*A list of the intents incorporated in Title V has been provided by Tankersley (1975).

at such higher levels might still be considered intermediate program results, their documentation constitutes firmer evidence of progress toward the planned ultimate program outcomes. These more final but still intermediate outcomes would presumably be dependent upon the effective functioning of the organization and techniques developed at an earlier project stage. Examples of such outcomes might include, depending upon the nature of the specific Title V project, the organization of citizens' development groups at the local community level, the preparation and dissemination of guidelines for developmental efforts based on research, the establishment of new forms of cooperation between rural institutions and agencies, or the administration of conferences or courses on development for rural leaders. Outcomes of such a nature would be expected to lead to still more final outcomes such as increased employment or increased access to health care.

It is, of course, possible that the anticipated outcomes of some Title V programs will not occur, or apparently not occur. A failure to detect the outcomes that the program model predicts can be the result of a variety of factors including faulty measurement. However, if it is clear that the problem is not lodged in a failure to detect outcomes that did in fact occur, then it is reasonable to consider at least two other possible causes, a failure to implement the program as planned, or a failure of the theory that guided development of the program model. An effective evaluation will obviously need to be designed to permit the identification of one or the other of these factors as responsible for program failure. A

careful documentation of program operations, a measurement of immediate and intermediate outcomes, and a comparison of these results to the program model will usually be sufficient to establish whether the program has been implemented as planned. If it has not, an effort should be made to establish the reason for the failure, including consideration of whether there were sufficient resources available to carry out the plan. If it has been implemented, then failure may be attributed to inclusion of faulty techniques in the plan or to flaws in the theory, or reasoning, that was the basis for the program.

Although it is conceptually simpler to structure program outcomes models as if outcomes in the causative chain can be expected to occur strictly in sequence, in operation the program may not always conform precisely to the model. It is likely in a Title V project, for example, that a university's project delivery system, which is a lower-level outcome, will still be undergoing the shaping that is necessary to enable it to fit into place at the same time that higher-level outcomes may be emerging. In effect, even though anticipated intermediate outcomes may be achieved only partially, an essentially effective program operation may possibly still be carried on.

Measuring Title V Program Outcomes

A key element of effective evaluation is the obtaining of reasonably accurate measurements of program outcomes. Although the approaches to such measurement may range from highly quantitative techniques to more general descriptions, effective measurement is always dependent upon careful specification of the outcomes that are

to be assessed. Some tentative suggestions of the type of Title V outcome variables that could serve as the focus of measurement are offered here, even though they are unlikely to apply precisely to any one state's Title V program. These suggestions are based on a very general Title V outcomes model that contains five outcomes levels. These levels, from the lowest or shortrun to the highest or longrun, are as follows: (1) development of the program plan; (2) organization of the program delivery system; (3) program operations; (4) establishment of new facilities, services, and opportunities in rural areas; and (5) improvement in the quality of rural living.

Although any specific Title V program would be likely to need a much more elaborated and specific model to guide it, the five-level general model that is outlined below can serve as a basis for the identification of possibly useful categories of outcome measurements. Thus, Title V outcomes that might be the focus of measurement at each of the five outcome levels are, in order from lowest to highest, as follows:*

1. Development of the Program Plan

   Organization of Responsibility Within the University. Describe the organizational structure that was created to plan the program. List the persons involved and their departmental affiliations. Specify the procedures that were followed in developing a plan.

   Creation of an Advisory Group. Describe the procedures followed to identify and select advisory group members. Specify the size of the group. Identify the backgrounds of the members. Describe the mode of operation. Specify its role and the extent of its influence on planning.

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*See Moe (1975) for a somewhat similar list of the elements that could help direct Title V program evaluation.

Creation of a Program Design. State the program objectives. Describe the planned program operations included in the design.

2. Organization of the Program Delivery System.

Establishment of a Formal Organizational Structure. Describe the components of the structure. Specify its organizational procedures. List its functions with respect to program delivery.

Involvement of Extra-University Institutions and Agencies. List the agencies. Describe their linkages to the program and to each other. Specify agency responsibilities or inputs to the program.

Involvement of a Range of University Departments. Specify the number of university staff members involved in the program. List their job categories and departmental affiliations. Specify their roles and inputs to program delivery.

Creation of New Research-Extension Relationships. Specify the nature of the research and extension involved. Specify what is new about the relationship between research and extension.

3. Program Operations.

Initiation of Direct Services to Rural People. Specify the nature of the service, such as providing assistance in solving housing problems or giving technical advice on community problem solving. Specify the number and categories of persons or groups contacted. Specify the number of these who are actively involved in the program.

Organization of Citizens' Groups. List the groups organized. Describe the nature, function, and size of these groups.

Creation of Specific Plans or Proposals for Development Projects. List the problems identified and the priorities assigned to them. Describe the plans or proposals.

Preparation of Publications and Educational Materials. List the publications. Describe their purposes. Specify the number of copies distributed and the groups that received them.

Development of Training Courses. Describe the courses and their purposes. Specify the criteria used for selection of participants. Give the numbers of participants.

Conduct of Research Studies. Describe the nature, purpose, and results of the studies conducted. Specify how the results were utilized.

4. Establishment of New Facilities, Services, Opportunities and Regulating or Governing Structures in Rural Areas.

Creation of New Community or Area Delivery Systems for Services Such as Health, Education and Manpower Development. Describe the systems. Give the number of citizens served.

Improvement of Rural Housing, Transportation, Water Systems, and Other Physical Facilities and Services. List the improvements. Specify the extent of improvement in quantitative terms. Give the number of rural citizens affected.

Establishment of New Regulations or Codes Such As Those Pertaining to Land Use or the Establishment of Regional Authorities. Describe the nature and purpose of each new regulation. Give the number of citizens potentially affected.

Development of New Job- and/or Income-Producing Opportunities. Specify the types and numbers of jobs developed. Describe the new income-producing opportunities.

5. Improvement in the Quality of Rural Living.

Creation of Higher Levels of Personal Well-Being Among Rural Citizens. Specify the extent of improvement in health, education, and personal need fulfillment among citizens.

Creation of Satisfying Employment and Increased Income Among Rural Citizens. Specify the improvements in employment and income in quantitative terms.

Creation of a More Healthful and Satisfying Rural Environment. Specify changes in the incidence of environmentally related health problems. Specify changes in the recreational use of the land.

Utilization of a Wider Range of Material and Cultural Opportunities Among Rural Citizens. Specify in quantitative terms the changes in patterns of use of leisure.

As has been mentioned, persons familiar with Title V activities will not only be able to elaborate upon the five outcome levels that have been listed, but also to add to the possible specific outcomes suggested at any level. The list of outcomes is, however, sufficiently comprehensive that no one Title V project will be likely to encompass all of the outcomes included. In the usual case, a specific project will tend to be guided by a model with more outcome levels but with a lesser range of diverse possible outcomes within the higher levels.

As a final cautionary note, the use of a program outcomes model does not eliminate the necessity of exercising care in attributing the occurrence of outcomes to program operations. It is possible that outcomes may be influenced by forces or circumstances that are not components of a program. Moreover, it is unlikely that Title V program evaluations will include the use of the control groups or control communities that would be needed to unequivocally establish that causative relationships exist between a program and its apparent outcomes. Considering the broad aims and pilot nature of Title V programs, it is not reasonable to expect that evaluations would emphasize the methodological precision of using control groups. Nevertheless, the implication for evaluation is that careful estimates will need to be made of the extent to which program outcomes might have been influenced by factors other than the Title V program itself. Objective determination that predicted outcomes did occur, together

with specific estimates of the degree of influence exerted by non-program forces, will provide an acceptable basis for judgment of the value of Title V. If expected outcomes do not occur or if they occur only in limited degree, identifying the reasons for non-occurrence will help in improvement of the effectiveness of the program while it is underway.

Summary

In summary, this paper has presented some suggestions concerning the conceptualization of Title V program evalution. Suggestions concerning appropriate focal points for the measurement of current and future Title V program outcomes have also been offered. These suggestions are a reflection of at least a portion of the body of current thinking about evaluative research. That thinking would also suggest that the types of evaluations that Title V programs currently demand not only are necessary but also can produce information of lasting value if they are well planned and systematically conducted.

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